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Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 899
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY CAIRO
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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 DAMASCUS 8478

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, XF, US
SUBJECT: SYRIAN LEADERSHIP BEGINS TO CONTEMPLATE ITS ROLE IN PEACE PROCESS

1. SUMMARY:

ASAD IS NOW READY TO BRING SYRIA BACK INTO THE PEACE PROCESS. RESENTMENT OF PALESTINAIN INGRATITUDE COUPLED WITH AWARENESS OF THE COST OF SYRIA'S OWN DEVELOPMENT INCURRED BY ITS SUPPORT OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE WILL INFLUENCE HIS APPROACH TO NEGOTIATIONS. THERE IS ALSO LESS HEARD OF THE OLD "IMPERIALIST-ZIONIST CONSPIRACY" THEORY AND A READINESS TO ACCEPT THAT ARABS NEED AND ARE ABLE TO PUT THEIR OWN HOUSE IN ORDER.

2. SYRIA'S LEADERS AND ARE CURRENTLY DENYING ANY INTEREST IN FORMING A FEDERATION WITH JORDAN, LEBANON AND A FUTURE PALESTINIAN STATE, WHILE TAKING CERTAIN MODEST STEPS TOWARDS CLOSER LINKS WITH AMMAN. AT CAIRO NEXT WEEK, ASAD MAY EMERGE AS AN INNOVATIVE CONTRIBUTOR TO THE PEACE PROCESS. BASED ON PAST PERFORMANCE, HOWEVER, THIS IS UNLIKELY. HE IS, BY ALL SIGNS, LESS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT
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ISRAELI FLEXIBILITY AND LESS CERTAIN OF AMERICAN WILL

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TO BRING ABOUT A SETTLEMENT THAN SADAT. HE IS ALSO
PERSONALLY LESS FLEXIBLE THAN SADAT. SHOULD THE PEACE
PROCESS NOT GET MOVING, THE RECENTLY HEALED WOUNDS OF SYRO-
EGYPTIAN RIVALRY COULD REOPEN.

3. HOWEVER, NEITHER DOMESTIC OPPOSITION TO NEGOTIATIONS NOR RADICAL
ARAB PRESSURES ARE LIKELY TO DETER ASAD FROM BEGINNING NEW
TALKS. SYRIAN-PLO RELATIONS WILL EXERCISE COMPLEX
PRESSURES ON HOW DAMASCUS WILL APPROACH NEGOTIATIONS.
DAMASCUS MAY ALREADY BE WORKING TO MAKE THAT LEADERSHIP
MORE RESPONSIVE TO SYRIAN CONTROL. ASAD NEEDS PEACE FOR
THE SAKE OF SYRIA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. HE WILL BRING
HIS FAMILIAR TOUGHNESS TO THE PROCESS AND KEEP OPEN HIS
MILITARY SUPPLY LINE TO THE SOVIETS TO MAINTAIN A CREDIBLE
ALTERNATIVE TO NEGOTIATIONS. HOW FAR HE IS READY TO GO
ALONG WITH SADAT IN NEGOTIATIONS IS UNCLEAR, BECAUSE HE IS UNDER
FAR LESS ECONOMIC PRESSURE AND PROBABLY LESS TIME PRESSURE
THAN SADAT. ANOTHER OVER-ALL STALEMATE IS LIKELY IF THE
ARE UNABLE TO SYNCHRONIZE THEIR APPROACHES TO A SETTLEMENT.
THERE ARE ENCOURAGING PROPSEPCTS FOR AMERICAN POLITICAL
INFLUENCE IN DAMASCUS IN CONNECTION WITH THE PEACE PROCESS. END
SUMMARY.

4. NEW AWARENESS OF SYRIAN NATIONAL INTEREST:

FOR THE PAST SIXTEEN MONTHS, DAMASCUS HAS ENGAGED IN A
SERIES OF INTENSE SIDE BATTLES, BEGINNING IN SEPTEMBER 1976
AGAINST EGYPT FOR HAVING SIGNED SINAI II AND THROUGHOUT
1976 AGAINST SYRIA'S POLITICAL AND MILITARY OPPONENTS IN
LEBANON. THESE CONFRONTATIONS TOTALLY ABSORBED THE ENERGY
OF THIS LEADERSHIP AND KEPT IT FROM HAVING TO FORMULATE A
SYRIAN POSITION VIS--VIS THE PEACE PROCESS. THESE SAME
CONFRONTATIONS MEANWHILE SERVED TO CRYSTALIZE FOR SYRIANS
AWARENESS OF HOW COSTLY TO THEIR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT HAS
BEEN THEIR ROLE IN ARAB WORLD POLITICS, PARTICULARLY THAT
OF ACTING AS PRIME BACKER OF THE PALESTINIAN CAUSE. TODAY,
MORE THAN EVER BEFORE DURING THEIR 30 YEARS O INDEPENDENCE,
SYRIANS ARE RESENTFUL OF THE SACRIFICES THEY HAVE MADE FOR
THE PALESTINIANS.

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5. THE CONFRONTATIONS OF THE PAST YEAR HAVE DRIVEN HOME
THAT SYRIA BEST SERVES ITS OWN INTERESTS WHEN IT WORKS IN
HARMONY WITH CAIRO AND RIYADH. ASAD'S AGREEMENT LAST JUNE
TO "ARABIZE" HIS EFFORTS FOR A LEBANESE SOLUTION BY ACCEPTING
MILITARY UNITS FROM OTHER ARAB STATES, BEGAN A PROCESS
WHICH ENDED IN THE RIYADH AND CAIRO SUMMITS AND THE ENDORSE-
MENT OF SYRIA'S PREMINENT ROLE IN LEBANON. THIS SWIFTLY
ENDED SYRIA'S DIPLOMATIC ISOLATION AND EASED THE FINANCIAL

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BURDENS OF ITS LEBANESE CAMPAIGN. SYRIA'S RECONCILIATION
WITH CAIRO ALSO PAID OFF IN TERMS OF DIMINISHED DOMESTIC
TENSIONS AND PREPARED THE WAY FOR WHAT DAMASCUS BELIEVES
WILL BE FURTHER SUBSTANTIAL FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FROM THE
CONSERVATIVE OIL STATES.

6. THE MOOD OF SYRIA'S LEADERSHIP TODAY IS ONE OF SOBER
ELATION. SAD, KHADDAM AND THE PRESIDENT'S OTHER ADVISORS
ARE TOO KEENLY AWARE OF THE DIFFICULT ROAD AHEAD IN PACIFYING
LEBANON AND REVAMPING THEIR TIES WITH THE PLO TO BOAST OF
THEIR DIMPLOATIC AND MILITARY SUCCESSES. THE SEPTEMBER
TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE SEMIRAMIS HOTEL AND THE RECENT
ATTEMPT ON KHADDAM'S LIFE ARE REMINDERS THAT FOR ALL THE
VAUNTED PROWESS OF ITS SECURITY SERVICES, THIS REGIME CANNOT
FORESTALL VIOLENT ACTIONS AGAINST IT.

7. THE WINDING DOWN OF ACTIVE HOSTILITIES IN LEBANON HAS
REVEALED ONE ENCOURAGING NEW ASPECT OF THE POLITICAL MOOD
HERE. THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP HAS COME TO BLAME THE LEBANESE
CRISIS LESS ON ARABISM'S TRADITIONAL "ARCHENEMIES,"
IMPERIALISM AND ZIONISM, THAN ON THE ARABS THEMSELVES.
IN THIS COUNTRY, LONG ADDICTED TO THE "CONSPIRACY" THEORY,
THERE IS NOW AN UN-ARAB, AND MOST DEFINITELY UN-SYRIAN,
READINESS TO ACCEPT THAT ARABS CAUSED THEIR OWN MESS IN
LEBANON AND, MORE GENERALLY, THAT ARABS HAVE THE PRIMARY
RESPONSIBILITY TO HEAL THEIR DIVISIONS. THIS NEW MATURITY,
COUPLED WITH A GROWING IMPATIENCE TO GET ON WITH THE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SYRIA, SEEMS BOUND TO AFFECT
SYRIA'S FORMULATION OF ITS APPROACH TO THE NEXT STAGE OF
THE MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS.

8. SRYO-JORDIANIAN TIES:

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WHILE SYRIA'S UNIONIST INSTINCTS ARE TRADITIONAL AND
DEEP, IT WILL MOVE INTO THE PEACE PROCESS EXPECTING TO
COORDINATE ITS NEGOTIATING POSITION WITH THE OTHER ARABS
AND NOT IN A POSITION TO IMPOSE ITS
DESIRES ON ANY OTHER ARAB COUNTRY. SYRIAN SPOKESMEN HAVE
BEEN QUICK TO DENY, AND NOT RPT NOT JUST DOWNPLAY, RECENT
REPORTS THAT DAMASCUS SEEKS TO BUILD A FEDERAL ARRANGEMENT
WHICH WILL INCLUDE AMMAN, BEIRUT AND A PALESTINIAN STATE.
SYRIA HAS MADE SEVERAL PRACTICAL, OVERT MOVES TOWARDS CLOSER
LINKS WITH JORDAN AND 1976 IS ENDING ON THE UPBEAT NOTE THAT
AMMAN AND DAMASCUS ARE EXPLICITLY INTERESTED IN SOME SORT
OF FUTURE FEDERAL ARRANGEMENT. BUT THE EFFORTS TO DATE
HAVE BEEN DELIBERATELY KEPT UNDRAMATIC AND THE JOINT ACCOMPLISH-
MENTS ARE LIMITED. PROGRAMS FOR CLOSER COOPERATION IN CIVIL
AVIATION, EDUCATION ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ETC. SEEM RELATIVELY

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MODEST. THEY MAY ONE DAY SERVE AS A STRONG ENOUGH PLATFORM
FOR MORE FORMAL POLITICAL AND MILITARY TIES. BUT SYRIA'S
PRESENT AIM IS NEITHER TO UNSEAT HUSSEIN NOR TO MOVE
AGGRESSIVELY IN ANY OTHER WAY AGAINST JORDANIAN SOVEREIGNTY.

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EXDIS
9. LEBANON:

SYRIA'S INTENTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS IN LEBANON ARE NOT
YET FULLY TESTED. ASAD HAS DEFERRED PUBLICLY TO SARKIS IN
ALL MATTERS AFFECTING ADMINISTRATION OF LEBANON INCLUDING
DEPLOYMENT OF SYRIAN SECURITY FORCES. THERE ARE REPORTS
THAT ASAD URGED SARKIS TO "REVOLUTIONIZE" THE LEBANESE
LEADERSHIP BY FORMING A GOVERNMENT OF TECHNOCRATS, THEREBY
DEPRIVING LEBANON'S AGING POWER BROKERS OF ANY POLITICAL
FUTURE. THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT ASAD WANTS TO ANNEX ANY
PART OF THAT COUNTRY. HE INTENDS TO BRING HIS ARMY BACK
HOME AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE, LEAVING BEHIND AN "INDENDENT"
LEBANON OVER WHICH HE UNDOUBTEDLY EXPECTS TO REMAIN THE
PREDOMINANT OUTSIDE INFLUENCE.

10. A POLITICALLY INDEPENDENT STATE OF LEBANON
WITH ITS FREE ENTERPRISE ECONOMY, HAS BROUGHT DEFINITE
ADVANTAGES TO SYRIA IN THE PAST. FURTHERMORE, THE PAST 18
MONTHS OF INTIMATE DEALINGS WITH LEBANESE POLITICAL COMPLEXITIES
HAVE DEMONSTRATED JUST HOW INDIGESTIBLE LEBANON WOULD BE SHOULD
DAMASCUS TRY TO SWALLOW IT.

11. EGYPTIAN RELATIONS:

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ON HIS FORTHCOMING TRIP TO CAIRO, ASAD WILL BE POR-
TRAYED AS AN EQUAL IN PLANNING A JOINT ARAB APPROACH TO
THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. THIS IS A USEFUL IMAGE FOR HIM
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TO PROJECT WITHIN SYRIA AND SUPPORTIVE OF HIS NEWLY
RESTORED PARTNERSHIP WITH SADAT. ASAD MAY SURPRISE US AND
EMERGE AS AN INNOVATIVE CONTRIBUTOR TO THE PEACE PROCESS.
BUT BASED ON HIS PAST PERFORMANCE, BEFORE THE SYRO-
EGYPTIAN FALLING OUT OVER SINAI II, HE MORE LIKELY WILL
ADOPT A DEFERENTIAL POSTURE ECHOING SADAT, READY TO MOVE
WITH, BUT ONE STEP BEHIND, HIS EGYPTIAN COLLEAGUE. THERE
IS A DIFFERENCE IN STYLE BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERS. SADAT
TALKS BUOYANTLY ABOUT PROGRESS TOWARDS A SETTLMENT IN
THE COMING MONTHS. ASAD'S TACITURN COMMENT IN A RECENT
PRESS INTERVIEW THAT, " I DID NOT SYA THE TIME WAS NOT RIPE,"
SHOWS HE IS NO SALESMAN. IN ADDITION, HOWEVER, THE TWO
PERHAPS STILL EVALUATE DIFFERENTLY THE PROSPECTS FOR MOVE-
MENT TOWARDS PEACE. ASAD HAS A LESS OPTIMISTIC APPRAISAL
OF THE LIMITS OF ISRAELI FLEXIBILITY AND THE EXTENT OF
AMERICAN WILL BE INFLUENCE ISRAEL AND MAY ALSO HIMSELF
BE MORE INFLEXIBLE THAN SADAT. WE SHOULD BE WARY OF
EGYPTIAN ASSURANCES THAT THEY CAN BRING ASAD ALONG.

12. MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN OF A "DEAL" AT YIRADH WHEREBY
ASAD WOULD STOP CRITICIZING SINAI II IN RETURN FOR A FREE
HAND IN LEBANON. WE HAVE NO BASIC QUARREL WITH THAT
HYPOTHESIS BUT ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHAT WEIGHT TO ALLOT
TO THE VARIOUS MOTIVATIONS WHICH REPORTEDLY LED TO THE DEAL.

ONE FACTOR WAS THE IMPENDING U.S. ELECTION AND ADVICE
OF TITO, AN INFLUENTIAL FRIEND OF EGYPT AND SYRIA, TO RE-
CONCILE THEIR DIFFERENCES TO FACE THE NEW U.S. ADMINSTRATION.
BUT PERHAPS MOST SIGNIFICANTLY, ASAD WENT TO RIYADH
FEELING MORE ACUTE ECONOMIC PRESSURES ON SYRIAN THAN HE HAD
AT THE ABORTIVE SYRO- EYGPTIAN PRIME MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE
AT RIYADH THE PREVIOUS JUNE. WE ALSO SUSPECT
THAT THE SPEED OF THE SYRO-EGYPTIAN RECONCILIATION INDICATED
THAT BOTH SIDES WANTED TO FIND A WAY OUT OF THEIR PROLONGED
AND INCREASINGLY STERILE CONFRONTATION. EACH SEEMS TO HAVE
REALIZED HE COULD NOT BRING THE OTHER DOWN.

13. IN ANY EVENT, THE SYRO-EGYPTIAN FRIENDSHIP BEARS THE
SCARS OF MANY RECENTLY HEALED WOUNDS AND RENEWED RIVALRY IS A
GOOD POSSIBILITY SHOULD THE PEACE PROCESS NOT GET UNDERWAY
IN THE COMING MONTHS OR MOVE IN A WAY UNACCEPTABLE TO
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ASAD. IN THE 50'S AND 60'S, SYRIA'S CAPABILITY AND DESIRE
TO PLAY A ROLE IN THE SEARCH FOR AREA STABILITY
AND EVEN TO FOSTER ARAB UNITY WERE SLIGHT. MEMORIES OF THE
DAMAGE DAMASCUS WROUGHT TO THE BAGHDAD PACT AND THE FACT OF THE
1958-61 SYRO-EGYPTIAN UNION ARE STILL VIVID. THE VICIOUSNESS
OF SYRIA'S ATTACK ON SINAI II IN LATE 1975 SERVED AS A
REMINDER OF ITS SKILL AS "A BORN SPOILER." PERHAPS NO
ONE IN THE SUMMER OF 1975, HOWEVER, FORESAW THE LENGHTS
TO WHICH SYRIA WOULD BE PREPARED TO GO IN SAVAGING EGYPT
ABOUT SINAI II. (IT HAD SPOKEN OF THE PROSPECTIVE ACCORD
IN SUCH MUTED TERMS AS "IT COULD BE AWKWARD" AND "VERY
DIFFICULT" IF EGYPT TOOK AN INDEPENDENT COURSE.) DAMASCUS
REPORTEDLY REJECTED ADVICE EVEN FROM
THE PLO LEADERS TO TREAT SINAI II AS A REGRETTABLE
BUT CLOSED CHAPTER. THE SYRIANS, OF COURSE, FINALLY NOT
ONLY EMBARRASSED THE EGYPTIAN LEADERSHIP BUT INCITED IT TO
COUNTERATTACK, INCLUDING ASSISTING IRAQI INVOLVEMENT IN
LEBANON AGAINST SYRIAN FORCES LAST SUMMER. THE NET RESULT
OF THESE EPISODES DEMONSTRATED ONCE AGAIN THE SOUNDNESS
OF THE AXIOM THAT EGYPT CANNOT MAKE PEACE WITHOUT DAMASCUS
AND ITS COROLLARY THAT SYRIA CANNOT MAKE EVEN
LIMITED WAR WITHOUT CAIRO.

14. SYRIAN INHIBITIONS ABOUT THE PEACE PROCESS:

THREE PROBLEMS ARE COMMONLY INDENTIFIED AS RESTRAINTS
ON ASAD'S ABILITY TO MOVE INTO THE PEACE PROCESS: DOMESTIC
OPPOSITION TO NEGOTIATIONS, RADICAL ARAB PRESSURES, AND
SYRIAN-PLO RELATIONS.

15. TOO LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT THE DYNAMICS OF SYRIA'S
INTERNAL POLITICS. CONVENTIONAL WISDOM HOLDS THAT THE
RULING BAATH PARTY HAS BECOME A MERE FACADE FOR ASAD'S
EXERCISE OF A HIGHLY PERSONAL DICTATORSHIP. THAT MAY
OVERSTATE THE CASE BUT IT SEEMS SAFE TO ASSERT THAT THE
SO-CALLED EXTREMISTS IN THE BAATH WIELD MORE INFLUENCE IN
DOMESTIC AFFAIRS, VIZ. BLOCKING MOVES FOR ECONOMIC LIBERALIZA-
TION, THAN THEY DO IN FOREIGN POLICY. ASAD'S LATEST DIPLOMATIC
AND MILITARY SUCCESSES IN LEBANON SEEM FOR THE MOMENT
TO HAVE PUT HIM BEYOND THE REACH OF HIS CRITICS. IN ANY
CASE, NO ONE OF THEM SEEMS SERIOUSLY DISPOSED TO SEIZE
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POWER AND ASSUME THE RISKS OF GUIDING SYRIA THROUGH THE
NEXT STAGE OF NEGOTIATIONS.

16. AMONG HIS FOREIGN ARAB CRITICS, ONLY IRAQ OFFERS

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A SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO THE PRESIDENT. THE IRAQI CAPABILITY
TO TRAIN AND LAUNCH ASSASSINATION TEAMS AGAINST
THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP HAVE ALREADY BEEN SUCCESSFULLY TESTED.
INTELLIGENCE REPORTS INDICATE THEY WILL CONTINUE.
NONETHELESS, THE PRESIDENT'S PERSONAL
COURAGE AND FATALISM OPERATE TO KEEP HIM ON A STEADY COURSE.
REPORTS, FOR EXAMPLE, DESCRIBE HIM AS ENTIRELY CALM IN THE
WAKE OF THE RECENT ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF HIS FOREIGN
MINISTER.

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EXDIS

17. SYRIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT PROMISE
TO EXERCISE A MUCH MORE COMPLEX INFLUENCE ON HOW DAMASCUS
WILL APPROACH PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. ASAD REMAINS CONVINCED THAT
THE SECURING OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS REMAINS THE CORE
PROBLEM FOR AREA STABILITY. HIS CONVICTION THAT THE ARABS
MUST FOCUS ON PALESTINIAN RIGHTS IS DEEPER THAN HUSSEIN'S,
AND PROBABLY SADAT'S AS WELL. HE UNHESITATINGLY RESTATED
HIS SUPPORT FOR THE PLO AS THE SOLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
PALESTINIANS JUST AFTER HE BROUGHT THEM MILITARILY TO THEIR
KNEES. ON THE OTHER HAND, ASAD'S CONTEMPT FOR THE PRESENT
PALESTINIAN LEADERSHIP IS MANIFEST AND HIS POLITICAL-MILITARY
CONFRONTATION WITH THEM OVER THE PAST YEAR AND A HALF IN
LEBANON HAS DEEPENED HIS CONVICTION THAT THE LEADERSHIP
MUST SOMEHOW BE MADE RESPONSIVE TO DAMASCUS' CONTROL. HOW
HE WILL GO ABOUT THIS IS UNCLEAR, BUT SIGNS ARE MULTIPLYING
THAT HE AND SADAT MAY BE DEVELOPING THEIR OWN DEFINITION

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OF WHAT "PALESTINIAN NATIONAL RIGHTS" WILL CONSIST.

18. WHY SYRIA WILL NEGOTIATE:
ASAD WILL TRY NEGOTIATIONS BECAUSE PEACE WILL LET HIM DIVERT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AT LEAST SOME OF THE RESOURCES NOW SPENT ON HIS MILITARY. HE WILL NEGOTIATE FOR PEACE ALSO BECAUSE SADAT WANTS TO DO SO AND THE EVENTS OF 1976 HAVE MADE IT PLAIN SAUDI ARABIA WILL NOT FINANCE A SYRO-EGYPTIAN CONFRONTATION. ECONOMIC PRESSURES ON ASAD ARE FAR LESS THAN
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ON SADAT. IN SYRIA'S BASICALLY SOLID AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY, NO ONE IS STARVING; AND FAR FROM BEING OVERPOPULATED, SYRIA FACES AN ACUTE LABOR SHORTAGE IN MANY SECTORS. BUT ASAD ALSO WANTS SAUDI MONEY; SYRIA'S OWN DEVELOPMENT HAS BEEN FALTERING AND INFLATION CONTINUES AT ABOUT A WORRISOME THIRTY PERCENT RATE. ASAD RECOGNIZES THAT ONLY WHEN HE IS ABLE TO GET THE PALESTINIAN MONKEY OFF HIS BACK WILL HE BE ABLE TO DEVOTE THE ATTENTION AND RESOURCES NEEDED TO BRING HIS COUNTRY TO THE LEVEL WHICH HE WANTS IT TO ATTAIN AND GIVE THE HIGHER STANDARD OF LIVING TO HIS FELLOW CITIZENS WHICH THEY INCREASINGLY DEMAND.

19. HE WILL BE A TOUGH AND SKEPTICAL NEGOTIATOR WHO SHARES SADAT'S PROFESSED BELIEF THAT MANY OF THE HISTORICAL HATREDS BETWEEN ARAB AND ISRAELI CAN ONLY BE RESOLVED BY THE NEXT GENERATION. HE HAS ALLOWED SOVIET-SYRIAN TENSIONS OVER LEBANON TO BE SMOOTHED OVER BECAUSE HE WILL LET NOTHING INTERFERE WITH THE STEADY DELIVERY OF MILITARY SUPPLIES TO SYRIA. HE IS DETERMINED TO MAINTAIN A CREDIBLE MILITARY ALTERNATIVE TO THE PEACE TALKS. WHILE HE PRESENTLY APPEARS DISPOSED TO FOLLOW CAIRO'S LEAD IN DEVELOPING THE ARAB POSITION FOR NEGOTIATIONS, THE DISTANCE HE IS READY TO TRAVEL ALONG WITH SADAT IS NOT YET CLEAR. HE AND MOST SYRIANS OF OUR ACQUAINTANCE HOWEVER, HAVE COME TO TERMS PSYCHOLOGICALLY WITH ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST, BUT THERE HAVE BEEN NO SIGNS THAT THEY WOULD COMPROMISE ON THE RETURN OF TERRITORIES ISSUE. (HIS CONCEPT OF PEACE HAS BEEN ENDLESSLY (AND SIMPLISTICALLY) REITERATED AS REQUIRING THE RETURN OF ALL LANDS OCCUPIED IN 1967 AND SECURING OF PALESTINIAN NATIONAL RIGHTS. HE REMAINS CAGEY ABOUT WHAT THE LATTER CONSIST OF, REFERRING HIS QUESTIONERS TO THE PALESTINIANS THEMSELVES. IN VIEW OF PALESTINIAN DIVISIONS, THIS IS A CYNICAL POSTURE. AT BEST IT REFLECTS HIS CHARACTERISTIC CAUTION AT NOT GETTING OUT IN FRONT OF THE ARAB WORLD ON THIS ISSUE.)

2. PROSPECTS FOR U.S. INFLUENCE ON SYRIA:
OUR POLITICAL DIALOGUE WITH THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP, WHILE NOT FOCUSED DIRECTLY ON RESUMING THE PEACE PROCESS,

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HAS BECOME NOTABLY FRANKER AND MORE RELAXED IN THE COURSE
OF 1976. ASAD HAS RECENTLY PUBLICLY STATED HIS INTEREST
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IN CLOSER RELATIONS. THE PRESIDENT'S OVERALL APPRECIATION
OF OUR RELATIONSHIP REFLECTS BOTH HIS DESIRE THAT SYRIA
BENEFIT FROM BETTER BILATERAL ECONOMIC TIES AND HIS
REALISTIC APPRAISAL OF THE STRENGTH OF U.S.-ISRAELI
RELATIONS AND OUR COMMITMENT TO THE SECURITY AND
SOVEREIGNTY OF ISRAEL.

21. OUR COUNSEL TO THE SYRIANS THAT ARAB UNITY,
PARTICULARLY BETWEEN RIYADH, CAIRO, AND DAMASCUS, WILL BE
BASIC TO PROGRESS TOWARDS A PEACE SETTLE-
MENT NO LONGER AROUSES SUSPICIONS OF U.S. DUPLICITY. THE
SECRETARY'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS OF THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE
MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY PLAYED A PART IN
IMPROVING OUR DIALOGUE. IN ADDITION, THE SYRIANS APPRECIATED
THE CONSISTENCY OF OUR POSITION TOWARDS THE LEBANESE
CRISIS. ASAD HAS PUT BEHIND HIM HIS SHARP EXASPERATION AT
OUR ADVICE OF LAST WINTER TO KEEP HIS TROOPS OUT OF LEBANON.
HAVING NEVER APPROVED SYRIA'S MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THAT
COUNTRY WHILE STEADILY VOICING SUPPORT FOR SYRIAN POLITICAL
INITIATIVES, WE AVOIDED ENGAGING IN THE DOUBLE TALK OF
CERTAIN ARAB NATIONS AND THE SOVIET UNION.

22. ANOTHER ASSIST TO OUR DIALOGUE HAS BEEN SYRIAN APPRECIATION
OF OUR MORAL SUPPORT FOR ITS INDEPENDENT NATIONAL POLICY
DURING THE JUNE-SEPTEMBER PERIOD WHEN DAMASCUS FACED INCREASING
CRITICISMS AND, PROBABLY, THREATS OF AN ARMS CUTOFF BY MOSCOW.
OUR RECENT EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN ABOUT THE SITUATION IN SOUTH
LEBANON HAVE NOT RAISED SYRIAN HACKLES; THEY APPEAR TO ACCEPT THAT
OUR INTENTION HAS BEEN MERELY TO CONVEY OUR BEST ESTIMATE
OF LIKELY ISRAELI REACTIONS.

23. OUR ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE PROGRAM IS NOW AT THE POINT
WHERE WE WILL BEGIN TO IMPLEMENT A FEW BASIC DEVELOPMENT
PROJECTS. THESE ARE CAREFULLY STUDIED, USEFUL CONTRIBUTIONS
TO THE SYRIAN ECONOMY WITH A MODERATELY HIGH PROFILE WHICH
WILL BRING SOME 200 PRIVATE AMERICAN EXPERTS AND CONTRACTORS
TO THIS CAPITAL DURING THE NEXT TWO YEARS. THE RECEPTION
GIVEN VISITING PROMINENT AMERICANS SUCH AS SECRETARY SIMON,
TO PRIVATE BUSINESSMEN AND CONGRESSIONAL DELEGATIONS HAS BEEN
CONSISTENTLY WARM.

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24. THE PAST THREE YEARS OF U.S. DIPLOMACY HAVE STIMULATED AWARENESS HERE THAT THE OVERLAP BETWEEN U.S. AND ISRAELI NATIONAL INTERESTS IS NOT TOTAL. THIS AWARENESS WILL BE ONE INCENTIVE TO KEEP THE SYRIANS ENGAGED IN NEGOTIATIONS. ASAD WILL NOT FEEL THE SAME PRESSURES AS SADAT TO MOVE RAPIDLY BUT WILL PROBABLY SEEK TO STAY IN HARNESS WITH CAIRO. IF THE TWO CAPITALS ARE UNABLE TO SYNCHRONIZE THEIR APPROACH, A NEW STALEMATE IS LIKELY. HOWEVER, AS 1977 APPROACHES AND THE ARABS MOVE TO ORGANIZE THEMSELVES FOR A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO SETTLEMENT, PROSPECTS ARE ENCOURAGING THAT SYRIA WILL LOOK FOR A WAY ENGAGE ITSELF POSITIVELY IN THE PRECESS AND THAT THE U.S. CAN PLAY AN INFLUENTIAL ROLE IN DAMASCUS.
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Draft Date: 12 DEC 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: CunninFX
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
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Handling Restrictions: n/a
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ISecure: 1
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Status: NATIVE
Subject: SYRIAN LEADERSHIP BEGINS TO CONTEMPLATE ITS ROLE IN PEACE PROCESS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, XF, US
To: STATE
Type: TE
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